DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 247 559 CS 208 361

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TITLE Evaluating Dimensions of Television Program Reality: A Commonality Analysis of Perceived Superficiality, Perceived Plausibility and the Degree of Personal Utility.
PUB DATE Aug 84
NOTE 27p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (67th, Gainesville, FL, August 5-8, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attitude Measures; *Audience Analysis; Beliefs; Commercial Television; *Measurement Techniques; Opinions; Popular Culture; *Programing (Broadcast); Research Methodology; *Television Research
IDENTIFIERS Audience Response

ABSTRACT

To improve techniques for measuring concepts related to audience perceptions of the reality of television programing, a study established three goals: (1) to reduce the number of items currently used to measure perceived superficiality, perceived plausibility, and the degree of personal utility; (2) to determine whether a single item measure of general perceived program realism previously proven effective was useful as a fourth predictor for perceived television reality effects; and (3) to determine the relative importance of each of the new reduced-item scales for ascertaining the attitudes of viewers of "The Day After" toward nuclear issues. To accomplish these goals, subjects were randomly assigned either to watch ABC's "The Day After," NBC's "Kennedy," or a series of situational comedies on CBS, or to avoid prime time television entirely. A total of 230 questionnaires was given out and 139 were returned in usable form. In addition, program realism was measured, with four separate items--one created and three from Gallup sources--used to measure subjects' attitudes toward nuclear issues. Results of commonality analysis indicated that program realism, as an independent contribution, added little to the predictive power of the three new measures. A second level of analysis attempted to evaluate the individual importance of each of the three scales as predictors of audience attitudes toward nuclear issues. Results of this analysis indicated that the most important contributor to the variation in the nuclear attitude items was perceived superficiality. The importance of the degree of personal utility was less obvious, and it was tentatively recommended that the element of perceived plausibility be deleted from future studies. (CRH)

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Evaluating Dimensions of Television Program Reality: A Commonality Analysis of Perceived Superficiality, Perceived Plausibility and the Degree of Personal Utility

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Paper Presented to the Theory and Methodology Division
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Annual Convention, August 1984

CS 208 361

Fairly recently, investigators have begun seriously looking at the possible influence of audience perceptions of the reality of television programs as an important intervening variable in the relationship between media exposure and media effect. Much of this recent interest is the result of important models of the relationship between media use and audience response (Comstock et al., 1978), the continuing work and controversy surrounding the cultural indicators research of George Gerbner and Larry Gross (Gerbner et al., 1982; Gerbner et al., 1984) reviews of the relationships between television and behavior conducted through the National Institute of Mental Health (Pearl, Bouthilet & Lazar, 1982) and the pioneering work in the measurement of television reality perceptions by Hawkins (1977). This paper represents a continuing methodological effort to define and develop instruments measuring audience perceptions of television reality.

Numerous researchers have found a relationship between viewer acceptance of a television presentation as realistic and behavioral or attitudinal responses by viewers appropriate to the presentation. Slater and Elliott (1982) used commonality analysis to determine that

the most important influence on an adolescent sample's acceptance of television images of police behavior was "perceived law enforcement program realism," a measure developed by summing across individual realism estimates for six law enforcement television programs. Atkin (1983) found that violence displayed as news (realistically) was seen as more realistic than the same stimulus portrayed as entertainment by fifth and sixth grade subjects and that those exposed to the realistic news presentation scored significantly higher on hypothethical situational aggression than both a fantasy aggression viewing group and a control. More directly to the point, Elliott and Rudd (1984) used a field experimental design to randomly assign student subjects to watch one of two television docudramas, "The Day After" or "Kennedy," a situation comedy, "Goodnight Beantown," or to avoid watching television entirely the night "The Day After" was shown. They found that simple exposure to "The Day After" had virtually no effect on viewer attitudes toward nuclear issues but that a strong relationship existed between a number of nuclear issues and viewer perceptions of the program as superficial, plausible, and having personal utility for the viewer.

A second area of research dealing with the perceived reality of television programming has looked at the problems of measurement and definition associated with the concept. The most detailed of these was completed by Elliott, Rudd and Good (1983). Based on items developed largely by their subjects, they developed three scales: *perceived plausibility* measured the extent to which a program was viewed as providing social and environmental images like those

existing in the real world; *perceived superficiality* measured the extent to which a program was viewed as dealing with trivial matters in a repetitious manner; and the *degree of personal utility* measured the extent to which the information in a program was seen as useful by the viewer. All three scales have withstood extensive tests for reliability and validity and have received and withstood further testing in additional studies (Good, 1983; Elliott & Rudd, 1984). As such, these three measuring instruments represent the most extensively tested instruments for tapping an individual viewer's perceptions of the realism of television programming.

Our purpose in this study is to improve techniques for measuring concepts relating to audience perceptions of the reality of television programming. To partially accomplish this purpose we established three goals. First, we wanted to reduce the number of items currently used to measure perceived superficiality, perceived plausibility and the degree of personal utility as developed by Elliott, Rudd and Good (1983) from ten, twelve and nine items respectively to a more manageable size for future research applications. Second, we wanted to determine whether or not a single item measure of general perceived program realism that had proved effective in the past (Elliott & Slater, 1980; Slater & Elliott, 1982; Elliott, Rudd & Good, 1983; Elliott & Rudd, 1984) was useful as a fourth predictor for perceived television reality effects. Finally, we wanted to determine the relative importance of each of the new reduced item scales for the attitudes of viewers of "The Day After" on nuclear issues. To accomplish these three goals, we applied factor and commonality

analysis to data collected from a field experiment conducted on November 20, 1983, where subjects were randomly assigned to watch either ABC's "The Day After," NBC's "Kennedy," a series of situation comedies ending with "Goodnight Beantown" on CBS, or to avoid prime time television entirely.

Method and Procedure

University student volunteers were asked to participate in a field experiment involving ABC's upcoming showing of "The Day After" the week before its air date of Sunday, November 20, 1983. Questionnaires were distributed to the volunteers containing explicit instructions to open the envelopes containing the questionnaire and instructions between 5:00 and 7:30 PM on Sunday, November 20. Upon opening the instructions, students were directed to watch either "The Day After" on ABC, "Kennedy" on NBC, the situation comedies on CBS beginning at 8:00 PM and ending at 10:00 PM with "Goodnight Beantown," or to avoid prime time television entirely that Sunday evening. Students were instructed to return the completed questionnaires at their next class meeting.

The Sample. A total of 230 questionnaires was distributed and 157 were returned during the next week of class. Eighteen of the returned questionnaires were unusable leaving 139 (60.4%) available for analysis. "The Day After" was watched by 43 students (30.9% of the sample), 26 (18.9%) watched "Kennedy," 28 (20.1%) watched the CBS situation comedies, and 42 (30.2%) watched no television at all. The

sample was made up of 40.3% women and 59.7% men with a mean age of 21.2 years. The sample was 18.1% freshmen, 29.0% sophomores, 26.8% juniors, 21.0% seniors, and 5.1% graduate students.

Variables. We used four variables to measure viewer perceived program realism. Program realism, a single item measure, required subjects to evaluate the program they had watched along a continuum running from extremely unrealistic (1) to extremely realistic (5). Perceived superficiality[1] began as a ten item scale measuring the audience's perception of a television program as dealing with trivial matters in a repetitious manner. Perceived plausibility included twelve items dealing with how closely a television program is perceived as providing social and environmental images like those existing in the real world. The degree of personal utility, the final perceived program realism measure, began with nine items and measured the extent to which the information in a program is seen as useful by the viewer.

We used four separate items to measure the subjects' attitudes toward nuclear issues. In a previous study on this same data (Elliott & Rudd, 1984), these four statements were found to show consistent correlational relationships with the perceived program realism measures. The first was created by us to identify how people felt about the possibility of a nuclear war. The remaining three attitude items were drawn from Gallup sources (*Gallup Report*, 1983) and dealt with questions related to nuclear policy. All nuclear attitude items were presented in a Likert format with possible responses ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The nuclear attitude

items appear below.

I believe the United States has the capability to win a nuclear war with the Soviet Union.

There should be an immediate agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union for a verifiable freeze on the deployment of nuclear weapons.

At the present time, the Soviet Union is stronger in terms of nuclear weapons than the United States.

The United States is doing all it can to preserve peace in the world.

Analysis. We used principal factor analysis with orthogonal rotation to reduce the the number of elements in each scale.[2] Items were excluded from the factor analysis if any of their item-total correlations from the reliability analyses of three previous studies (Elliott, Rudd & Good, 1983; Good, 1983; Elliott & Rudd, 1984) was below .40 or if they had two or more item-total correlations between .40 and .50. This provided us with an initial set of six items from the perceived superficiality scale, seven items from the perceived plausibility scale, and seven items from the degree of personal utility scale. A factor was interpreted as meaningful if it explained at least ten per cent of the total variation (Bennett & Bowers, 1976). After an initial run, items with multiple loadings (.40 on more than one factor) or low factor loadings (less than .50 approximately) on any single factor were eliminated. The reliability of the resulting summated scales was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha.

We used commonality analysis to test the relative contribution of each of our predictor variables--program realism, perceived superficiality, perceived plausibility and the degree of personal

utility -- on the variation explained for each of the four nuclear issue attitudes. Commonality analysis decomposes the explained variation in a dependent variable in terms of the unique and common contribution of the independent variables. It is a technique that is particularly useful in the early stages of theoretical development, as we are here, where little is known of the causal priority among variables (Kerlinger & Pedhazur, 1973). It is also helpful in selecting which of a number of possible variables is most important as a predictor (Newton & Spurrell, 1967) and it is recommended over standard statistical tests as a method of determining the variables to be retained in a regression equation (McPhee & Seibold, 1979).

While the details of the calculations for developing commonality analyses are beyond the scope of this paper (see Kerlinger & Pedhazur, 1973; McPhee & Seibold, 1979), the basic logic is straightforward. For a two independent variable problem, the components of the variance explained in the dependent variable are partitioned into a unique element for variable 1, a unique element for variable 2, and the common effect of variable 1 and 2, defined by McPhee and Seibold (1979, p. 349) as "the extent to which two or more independent variables operate together to produce nondistinguishable 'common' effects on a dependent variable (above and beyond their own direct, individual, 'unique' effects)." In the case where three independent variables are involved, there will be three unique contributions, three two-way common contributions and one three-way common contribution. In general, the number of elements involved in the determination of the variation explained in the dependent variable is

$2^n - 1$ where n is the number of independent variables. Thus, for four independent variables, there would be fifteen contributors to the variation explained. Because of this it has been recommended that variables be grouped into meaningful units to avoid the difficulties associated with such large systems (Mood, 1971).

In commonality analysis, the selection of variables for retention as predictors is based on two primary considerations (McPhee & Seibold, 1979). First, select those variables with substantial unique contributions to the variation explained. Second, be sure to include at least one but as few as possible of the variables contributing to the common contribution.

Results

The results of the factor analysis are presented in Table 1. Each of the three original dimensions of the perceived reality of television programs, in this case "The Day After," "Kennedy," and "Goodnight Beantown," was replicated using orthogonal varimax rotation methods.[3] The percentage of variation accounted for by perceived superficiality, perceived plausibility and the degree of personal utility was 46.2%, 13.2% and 11.2% respectively. Next, the three elements making up each factor were summed to form three three element Likert type scales. Each scale was then tested for reliability using Cronbach's alpha. The reliability estimates were .83 for perceived superficiality, .79 for perceived plausibility and .72 for the degree of personal utility.

Table 1 About Here

The intercorrelations between the predictor and dependent variables used in this study are presented in Table 2 for the viewers of "The Day After" (n=43). The correlations above the diagonal in Table 2 are those obtained from the three item measures. The correlations below the diagonal are from the original scales used by Elliott and Rudd (1984) containing ten, twelve and nine items for perceived superficiality, perceived plausibility and the degree of personal utility respectively. A quick visual comparison indicates that the new three item scales show approximately the same intercorrelations as the greater item measures. The advantage, obviously, is that nine items can now be used where thirty-one were previously required.

Table 2 About Here

The other thing that is obvious from Table 2 is that each of the perceived reality measures shows strong relationships with one or more of the nuclear attitude statements and that the intercorrelations between the perceived reality measures themselves are quite high. For instance, the correlations of the perceived reality measures with agreement on the statement "I believe the United States has the capability to win a nuclear war with the Soviet Union" are -.48 for

program realism, .52 for perceived superficiality, -.45 for perceived plausibility and -.45 for the degree of personal utility. Interpretation of the meaning of these relationships is made complex because of the very high intercorrelations between the perceived reality measures themselves.

A typical way to begin to investigate the relative importance of each predictor variable on the measures of nuclear attitudes would be to perform a multiple linear regression on each dependent variable and compare the appropriate Betas and F-ratios. That has been done and is presented in Table 3.

Table 3 About Here

An investigation of this table reveals that it provides little useful information for determining the relative importance of each of the predictor variables. Only in the case of program realism and perceived superficiality for N4 does there seem to be an easily interpretable pattern where both variables seem to share importance as predictors. Like the correlational table, some indication is given of the relative importance of the variables but a clean interpretation is impossible.

Commonality analysis allows a more direct method for determining the importance of a variable as a predictor. In Table 4 an analysis is made comparing the variation explained by the single item program realism measure and the group of three perceived reality scales just

developed. The entries in the table indicate the unique contributions of program realism and the combined contribution of perceived superficiality, perceived plausibility and the degree of personal utility.

Table 4 About Here

A comparison of the unique contributions of program realism vs. the perceived reality scales in Table 4 indicates that these three sets of measures generally account for considerably more of the explained variation than program realism. The only exception to this is N3 where neither program realism nor the perceived reality scales offer a large unique contribution. The negative common contribution for N4 indicates a suppression effect between program realism and the set of perceived reality scales. Such a finding is often the effect of one of the variables being more strongly correlated with one of the independent variables (in this case with the three perceived reality scales) than with the dependent variables.

Applying the criteria that variables are to be retained to the degree that their unique contribution to the variation explained is high or, in the case of high common contributions, to retain at least one of the common elements, the interpretation is particularly clear for N1, N2 and N4. In each of these cases the unique contribution for the perceived reality scales is much higher than the unique contribution for program realism. For N3 the pattern is not quite as

clear. There is little difference in the unique contribution attributed to program realism (2.8%) and the unique contribution of the perceived reality scales (1.2%). Most of the variation explained is common to both program realism and to the perceived reality scales. If for no other reason than consistency, we would encourage retaining the perceived reality scales and discounting the program realism measure in this case also.

A commonality analysis for each of the perceived realism scales is presented in Table 5. The information in this table allows an analysis of the contributions of each scale on the four dependent variables. Comparisons of the unique and common contributions here will allow a reasonable decision regarding which of the three scales (or which subset of the three scales) can best be used as predictors for the nuclear attitudes used in this study.

Table 5 About Here

One thing is quite clear from an investigation of the unique contributions of each scale. Perceived superficiality is easily the most important of the three with unique contributions of 4.0%, 6.7%, 4.2% and 11.9% across the four nuclear attitude items. Just as obvious, perceived plausibility appears to be the least useful as a predictor. Its contributions of 0.8%, 1.6%, 0.6% and 0.0% strongly suggest it is adding little as a unique predictor in the equation. The degree of personal utility, with unique contributions higher than

perceived plausibility, also compares very unfavorably with perceived superficiality.

The two-way common contribution is also dominated by perceived superficiality. The common contribution resulting from perceived plausibility and the degree of personal utility (percentages accounted for of 0.5%, -0.4%, -0.3% and 0.0%) certainly suggests that there is little to be gained by retaining both of them. The variability common to perceived superficiality and perceived plausibility is high for N1 (6.4%) and for N4 (6.7%) but very low for N2 (-1.4%) and for N3 (-0.2%). A more consistent pattern exists for the commonality between perceived superficiality and the degree of personal utility. Here the percentage explained is moderate for N1 (4.0%) and N2 (4.2%) and low, but not negative, for N3 (2.4%) and N4 (1.7%). The three-way common contribution seems relatively high only for N1 (13.1%) where it represents about 40% of the total variation explained (31.7%). The three-way common contribution to the other dependent variables represents about one quarter of the total variation explained.

These findings suggest that most of the variation in the attitudes of viewers of "The Day After" can be accounted for by using a single measuring tool, perceived superficiality. Some additional value can likely be gained by including the degree of personal utility although it is not nearly as clear that this scale adds much that is unique. Certainly what does seem clear is that perceived plausibility might not be necessary for subsequent studies.

Discussion

We conducted this study to reduce a large number of scale items to a more manageable subset tapping the same underlying dimensions of perceptions of the realism of television programming. We succeeded in developing three three item scales that correlational analysis indicates measure approximately the same underlying concepts as earlier scales composed of many more items. We were then able to use the new three item scales to analyze the influence of these three perceived television reality measures and a single measure of program realism on four attitude statements about nuclear policy collected from a student sample of viewers of "The Day After." Here we found that it was difficult to interpret precisely what the effect of each of the independent variables was on the dependent variable set. To assist in our interpretation of the relative importance of our measures of program realism, perceived superficiality, perceived plausibility and the degree of personal uitlity we turned to commonality analysis.

Commonality analysis was conducted at two levels. First, we investigated the independent contribution of program realism and our combined set of three perceived television realism scales. This analysis indicated that program realism added little to the predictive power of the three new measures--perceived superficiality, perceived plausibility and the degree of personal utility. Our second level of analysis represented our attempt to evaluate the individual importance of each of the three scales as predictors of audience attitudes toward

nuclear issues. Here we discovered that the most important contributor to the variation explained in the nuclear attitude items was perceived superficiality. The importance of the degree of personal utility was less obvious. At least for now, that scale needs more investigation. There was little obvious need to retain perceived plausibility and we tentatively recommend that it be omitted as an element in future studies.

One of the more interesting suggestions from the findings on this second commonality analysis is our rejection of perceived plausibility since it is quite close conceptually to Hawkin's "magic window" (1977) and to Atkin's "perceived similarity" (1983). It may be that our findings are restricted to attitudes such as those related to nuclear or political items or that we have developed a suitable replacement for these constructs at the measurement and conceptual level. At a minimum, our findings suggest some expansion of the ideas related to television realism to include television's basic triviality as an important consideration.

This study has extended our understanding of the ways we can conceptualize and measure an audience's evaluation of the reality of a television program. It represents needed concern with measurement issues and the development of brief scales with high reliability that can be applied easily in the research situation. Until our researchers can begin to agree on the meaning of concepts, on their measurement and on their application we will continue to miss the true impact of concepts such as perceived superficiality on audience attitudes and behaviors and make often contradictory statements

regarding program reality perceptions because of our failure to agree on basic definitions. We hope that this and other parallel studies will stimulate a greater concern with important basic principles among media researchers.

NOTES

[1] The complete set of items used in the various studies involving perceived superficiality, perceived plausibility and the degree of personal utility can be obtained from the authors. One of the perceived superficiality items from the Elliott, Rudd and Good study (1983), "This show never changes from week to week," was omitted because of its inappropriateness for "The Day After" and "Kennedy."

[2] All data analyses were accomplished using the *SPSS* set of computer programs (Nie et al., 1975).

[3] The Pearsonian zero-order intercorrelations (n=97) for the items used in the final factor analysis are presented below. The estimate of commonality appears in italics along the diagonal.

	S1	S2	S3	P1	P2	P3	U1	U2	U3
S1	*.99*	.66	.67	-.48	-.29	-.43	-.35	-.24	-.31
S2		*.50*	.49	-.44	-.29	-.47	-.42	-.23	-.23
S3			*.47*	-.33	-.33	-.41	-.29	-.27	-.28
P1				*.45*	.48	.55	.38	.28	.34
P2					*.56*	.64	.37	.27	.23
P3						*.76*	.42	.35	.25
U1							*.60*	.47	.51
U2								*.36*	.40
U3									*.47*

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Table 1

Varimax Rotated Factor Matrix
Orthogonal Dimensions of the Perceived Reality of
The Day After, *Kennedy* and *Goodnight Beantown*
(N=97)

	FACTORS AND FACTOR LOADINGS		
Measures	Perceived Superficiality	Perceived Plausibility	Personal Utility
S1. (PROGRAM) doesn't present issues seriously.	.97	-.16	-.17
S2. The feelings portrayed by the actors in this program are too shallow and one-dimensional for the characters to seem real.	.61	-.29	-.22
S3. (PROGRAM) doesn't have any plot or real meaning.	.62	-.23	-.20
P1. The places where people in this program live and work are very true-to-life.	-.35	.49	.29
P2. People in this show are like people you or I might actually know.	-.15	.70	.21
P3. The way people really live their everyday lives is not portrayed very accurately on this program. (reverse coded)	-.29	.79	.22
U1. I use the ideas from this show when I find myself in similar real-life situations.	-.21	.27	.69
U2. This program helps me to understand what life would be like if I lived someplace different than where I do now.	-.12	.22	.55
U3. The ideas on this show about how to deal with people are helpful to me when I have to work with people in my own life.	-.18	.09	.66
% of Variation	46.2%	13.2%	11.2%

Table 2
[1]
Zero-Order Intercorrelations Between Reality Measures and Nuclear Attitudes for Viewers of *The Day After* (N=43)

	Real	Super	Plaus	Util	N1	N2	N3	N4
Real		-.80	.61	.53	-.48	.24	-.35	-.24
Super	-.78		-.72	-.57	.52	-.36	.31	.52
Plaus	.68	-.78		.49	-.45	.18	-.18	-.37
Util	.61	-.65	.61		-.45	.30	-.25	-.29
N1	-.48	.48	-.52	-.46		-.46	.20	.37
N2	.24	-.38	.22	.29	-.46		-.19	-.22
N3	-.35	.24	-.24	-.27	.20	-.19		.10
N4	-.24	.42	-.44	-.29	.37	-.22	.10	

[1] Correlations of .20 are significant at the p=.10 level, correlations of .26 are significant at the p=.05 level, and correlations of .35 are significant at the p=.01 level (one-tailed test). Correlations above the diagonal are for the three item scales while those below the diagonal are for the scales used in Elliott and Rudd (1984) containing 10 items for perceived superficiality, 12 items for perceived superficiality and 9 items for the degree of personal utility.

Table 3

Multiple Linear Regression Analysis
Nuclear Attitudes by Program Realism,
Perceived Superficial tv. Perceived Plausibility
and the Degree of Personal Utility
for Viewers of *The Day After* (N=43)

	NUCLEAR ATTITUDES[1]							
	N1. US has capacity to win nuclear war.		N2. Immediate verifiable freeze agreement.		N3. USSR is stronger in nuclear weapons.		N4. US is trying to preserve peace.	
Predictors	Beta	F Ratio	Beta	F Ratio	Beta	F Ratio	Beta	F Ratio
Program Realism	-.12	.31	-.16	.44	-.29	1.27	.52	5.55
Perceived Superficiality	.21	.68	-.52	3.23	.10	.13	.90	12.60
Perceived Plausibility	-.12	.39	-.17	.68	.12	.30	-.01	.00
Degree of Personal Utility	-.19	1.41	.18	.96	-.09	.25	-.04	.08
Multiple R^2	.32	4.52	.17	1.97	.13	1.53	.36	5.49

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[1] Overall F-Ratios (for multiple R^2) with 4 and 38 degrees of freedom are significant as follows: p=.10 when F=2.09; p=.05 when F=2.62; p=.01 when F=3.86. For individual predictors with 1 and 38 degrees of freedom, the significance levels are approximately as follows: p=.10 when F=2.84; p=.05 when F=4.10; p=.01 when F=7.35.

Table 4

Commonality Analysis of Nuclear Attitudes by Program Realism and Perceived Reality Scales for Viewers of *The DaY After*

Decomposition of Explained Variation	% of Explained Variation for N1	N2	N3	N4
Unique Contribution				
Program Realism	0.5%	1.0%	2.8%	9.2%
Perceived Reality Scales	8.7%	11.4%	1.2%	30.7%
Common Contribution				
Common to Program Realism and the Perceived Realism Scales	23.0%	4.8%	9.8%	-3.3%
Total (Multiple R^2)	32.2%	17.2%	13.8%	36.6%

Table 5

Commonality Analysis of Nuclear Attitudes by Perceived Superficiality, Perceived Plausibility and the Degree of Personal Utility for Viewers of *The Day After*

Decomposition of Explained Variation	% of Explained Variation for N1	N2	N3	N4
Unique Contribution				
Perceived Superficiality	4.0%	6.7%	4.2%	11.9%
Perceived Plausibility	0.8%	1.6%	0.6%	0.0%
Degree of Personal Utility	2.9%	1.8%	1.1%	0.0%
2-Way Common Contribution				
Common to Superficiality and Plausibility	6.4%	-1.4%	-0.2%	6.7%
Common to Superficiality and Personal Utility	4.0%	4.2%	2.4%	1.7%
Common to Plausibility and Personal Utility	0.5%	-0.4%	-0.3%	0.0%
3-Way Common Contribution				
Common to Superficiality, Plausibility and Personal Utility	13.1%	3.7%	3.2%	7.1%
Total (Multiple R^2)	31.7%	16.2%	11.0%	27.4%